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RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 0392  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L TASHKENT 000432

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/14/2018  
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [KIRF](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [TI](#) [UZ](#)  
SUBJECT: UZBEKISTAN: RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS COMMITTEE AND MFA  
WARN THAT JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES RISK DEREGISTRATION FOR  
ACTING OUTSIDE THE LAW

REF: A. TASHKENT 362  
[1](#)B. TASHKENT 299  
[1](#)C. 07 DUSHANBE 1531

Classified By: Poloff R. Fitzmaurice for reasons 1.4 (b, d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: During a five-day visit to Uzbekistan on March 27 - April 1 (septels), Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs Pamela Spratlen

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visited the Tashkent main Madrassah and the Jewish community in Bukhara. She also met with Ministry of Foreign Affairs representatives and the Acting Religious Affairs Committee Chairman Artibek Yusupov. She raised concerns over the recent harassment of Jehovah's Witnesses, including the case of a congregant in Samarkand who was charged with a criminal offense and faces five years' imprisonment (ref A). Both the Acting Chairman and the MFA's America's Desk Chief expressed pride in Uzbekistan's history of religious tolerance, but also warned that if the Jehovah's Witnesses continued to violate Uzbek law by proselytizing and other "illegal" acts, they risked deregistration of their last legal congregation, in Chirchiq, a move that would effectively ban the Jehovah's Witnesses in Uzbekistan. It is difficult to assess whether the threat was serious or mere bombast. The government also continues to deny that it is clamping down on devout Muslims.  
End summary.

A/DAS SPRATLEN RAISES RECENT HARRASSMENT OF JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES IN SAMARKAND

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[1](#)2. (C) A/DAS Spratlen, along with the Ambassador and DCM, met with Acting Religious Affairs Committee Chairman Artibek Yusupov on March 31. A/DAS Spratlen praised cooperation with

the government for cooperating with the U.S. government since it was named a Country of Particular Concern under the International Religious Freedom Statute and noted some encouraging signs, including the reported absence of anti-Semitism in Bukhara's Jewish community and the fact that Jehovah's Witnesses were able to observe the memorial of Jesus' death on March 22 largely without interference for the second year in a row. However, Spratlen raised two specific concerns. First, she noted the recent harassment of Jehovah's Witnesses in Samarkand, raising in particular the case of Olim Turayev, who was recently charged under Criminal Code 216 ("Illegal Establishment of a Religious Organization") and faces up to five years' imprisonment (ref A). More generally, she added that Uzbek courts continue to sentence Muslims for religious extremism without due process of law, most recently demonstrated by a case in Bukhara in which 13 individuals received long prison sentences based on scant evidence and coerced testimony (ref B).

ACTING CHAIRMAN ADMITS PROBLEMS WITH JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES,  
DENIES THAT THEY ARE SINGLED OUT

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13. (C) In response, Yusupov noted that of the 16 registered religious confessions in Uzbekistan, the Committee has had the most problems by far with the Jehovah's Witnesses. Yusupov asserted that the government treated Jehovah's Witnesses no differently than any other registered religious confession in Uzbekistan. He observed that the government enjoys good relations with other religious minorities, noting that an Orthodox congregation received permission to build a new church in Khorezm province two months ago.

14. Turning to specifics, he argued that the Jehovah's Witnesses frequently engaged in proselytizing, which is

illegal under Uzbek law, including by handing out literature and attempting to visit the homes of Muslims. Between November 2007 and March 2008, he claimed that Jehovah's Witnesses were charged with 30 violations of Uzbek law (Comment: Yusupov did not provide any details about the violations, but the Jehovah's Witnesses General Counsel has told us that their congregants are frequently charged with administrative offences and fined. End comment.) Yusupov noted that other countries, including Russia, also have had difficulties with the Jehovah's Witnesses (Comment: Interestingly enough, Yusupov did not make reference to Tajikistan, which officially banned the Jehovah's Witnesses in October 2007, ref C. End comment.) Yusupov also argued that the Jehovah Witnesses drew complaints from Uzbek families, because converts often divorced their spouses and abandoned their children and from Mahalla (neighborhood committee) chairmen regarding the group's activities.

15. (C) Yusupov also noted that he meets frequently with the Jehovah's Witnesses AmCit General Counsel, most recently having spoken to him by telephone on March 30. He reported reminding the General Counsel that all Jehovah's Witness activity outside the town of Chirchiq, the location of the Jehovah's Witnesses last registered congregation in Uzbekistan, was illegal and needed to stop. He also reported telling the General Counsel that the Religious Affairs Committee would consider granting registration to new congregations if Jehovah's Witnesses ceased violating Uzbek law.

16. (C) In response to Yusupov's claims, A/DAS Spratlen noted that Turayev was not arrested for proselytizing, but for the more serious criminal offense of organizing an illegal religious community. She also observed that several other congregants in Samarkand were detained in February at their homes, not while proselytizing. In addition, A/DAS Spratlen noted that Article 29 of the Uzbek constitution guarantees freedom of religion, including the right to worship freely and completely, and appeared to contradict more restrictive laws on religion later adopted by the government. She also reported that Ambassador-At-Large for Religious Freedom John

Hanford was still planning to visit Uzbekistan, and that one of the ideas that he is likely to raise is relaxing the more restrictive elements of Uzbekistan's religion laws, e.g., by reducing the number of individuals required for registering a congregation. Spratlen also observed that religious conversion did not necessarily destroy families, noting that interdominational marriages were common in the United States and interreligious families live harmoniously in their homes and communities.

#### LAST REGISTERED JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES CONGREGATION AT RISK

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¶7. (C) Towards the end of the meeting, Yusupov warned that the Jehovah's Witnesses faced deregistration of their last remaining registered congregation in Chirchiq if they continued to violate Uzbek law. The warning was then repeated by MFA America's Desk Chief Ismat Fayzullaev, who also attended the meeting and noted that there was a "limit to any patience." Fayzullaev also denied that there was any contradiction between the Uzbek Constitution and its restrictive laws on religion, and offered to arrange a meeting for the Ambassador at the Ministry of Justice to clarify the issue.

#### STATE-CONTROLLED WEBSITE VILIFIES JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

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¶8. (SBU) On March 31, the state-controlled gorizont.uz website carried an article describing Jehovah's Witnesses as "obsessed sect members" and advising readers to be vigilant and avoid falling under their pernicious influence. The article quotes a former congregant as stating that his conversion resulted in conflict with his parents and that he was instructed by congregation leaders to visit private residences and recruit new members. Similar articles criticizing Jehovah's Witnesses and Protestant groups have regularly appeared in state-controlled websites and newspapers. The same website also carried an article on March 20 criticizing poloff by name for his human rights work.

#### VISIT TO KUKOLDOSH MADRASSAH

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¶9. (SBU) On March 31, A/DAS Spratlen, accompanied by the DCM, visited the Kukoldosh Madrassah in Tashkent. which currently has 200 students between the ages of 16 and 34. It had thrived for 300 years until the Soviet era, and Director Abdulhakim Matqulov noted with pride that it was "returned to the Muslim people and restored" when Uzbekistan became independent. Competition for admission is fierce for the 200 slots, with 20-25 men competing for each available slot in the 4-year program of study. The 32 faculty members were educated all over the Islamic world, and Egypt in particular has provided substantial assistance to the Madrassah.

¶10. (SBU) The refurbished 16th century building now boasts an abundance of computers and flat-panel televisions with satellite programming, a sharp contrast to regular schools throughout Uzbekistan. Matqulov said the Madrassah's religious curriculum emphasizes the peaceful nature of Islam, exposes students to historical and contemporary Muslim scholars from all over the world. It also contains many secular subjects, including English. The Kukoldosh Madrassah is an accredited educational institution, whose graduates generally proceed to elite higher education institutions in the country. Matqulov introduced A/DAS Spratlen to four of the school's prize-winning "qaris" (Koran reciters), one of whom recently took top prize at a competition in Russia for all of the former Soviet Union. Matqulov noted that there is a separate madrassah exclusively for women in Tashkent which, like its male counterpart, is growing in popularity. On their way out, Matqulov showed a recently installed photo board, pointing out his photo with Ambassador-At-Large for Religious Freedom John Hanford, who visited the Madrassah in June 2007.

## MEETING WITH BUKHARAN JEWS

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¶11. (SBU) On March 29 A/DAS Spratlen met with Yusuf Ustaev, Chairman of the Bukhara Jewish Community, and visited a historic synagogue in the old city. The synagogue, which is undergoing a major renovation, is one of two still serving a dwindling population of approximately 800 Bukharan Jews in the once-thriving Jewish quarter. A nearby Jewish school still has more than 40 students who study the unique religious and cultural traditions. Ustaev lamented that the decline in the Jewish population, due largely to emigration for economic reasons, has made it increasingly difficult for young Jewish people to adhere to the strict tradition of marrying within the faith. Nonetheless, a rabbi and several synagogue leaders noted that the community has coexisted peacefully alongside tolerant Muslim neighbors for many centuries and that there is no anti-Semitism. As the meeting ended, Ustaev repeated a long-standing complaint about

perceived excessive restrictions in U.S. visa policies. The embassy treats visa cases with care. The Ambassador has discussed difficult refusals with the Rabbi at his request.

## COMMENT

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¶12. (C) The Uzbek government has previously raised the possibility of deregistering the last remaining registered congregation, in Chirchiq. The move would effectively ban the Jehovah's Witnesses in Uzbekistan, where they face more pressure than in neighboring Tajikistan, which banned them in October 2007. However, the Jehovah's Witnesses AmCit General Counsel told poloff on March 20 that the ban in Tajikistan has had little practical impact upon congregants there; in fact, he was hopeful that the ban might be overturned. Ironically, he noted that despite the ban, the Jehovah's Witnesses continue to have greater access to government officials in Tajikistan than in Uzbekistan. Post will continue to monitor whether the Uzbek government's warning amounts to bombast or reality.

¶13. (C) We will pursue the MFA's offer to arrange a meeting with the Ministry of Justice, though we doubt that they will be able to explain away the contradictions between Uzbekistan's Constitution, which guarantees all citizens religious freedom, and its restrictive laws on religion, which technically make any religious observance or education outside of its strict religion law technically illegal (Note: This is precisely the issue that the Jehovah's Witnesses General Counsel has told us he seeks to resolve, by pushing individual cases through the Uzbek court system in order to test the constitutionality of the Uzbek legislation. End note.)

¶14. (C) Religious freedom remains an area of serious human rights concern for us in Uzbekistan. Overall, A/DAS Spratlen's visits and meetings showed that the government is not yet prepared to adopt a more tolerant stance toward groups outside its highly restrictive religious policy regime. We need to stress with the Uzbeks that the Jehovah's Witnesses, in particular, do not pose a threat and should be allowed to enjoy the religious freedoms guaranteed to them under Uzbekistan's constitution. We are hopeful that a long-promised visit by Ambassador-At-Large for Religious Freedom John Hanford will jump start the Country of Particular Concern consultation process by giving the Uzbeks a clear model, along the lines of the letter he prepared for Vietnam, for addressing this issue.

¶15. (U) This message has been cleared by A/DAS Spratlen.  
NORLAND